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## George Eliot's Middlemarch: The Making of a Modern Marriage

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George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: The Making of a Modern Marriage

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Katherine Kelly

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2007  
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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I examine the evolving social and personal attitudes about marriage and love as depicted in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* by arguing that Eliot anticipates modern marriages by critiquing traditional Victorian marital values. For the purposes of this analysis, the applicable aspects of modern marriage are sexuality, shifting gender roles, and a dismissal of social class as the major factor in choosing a partner. In order to achieve this end, I apply close textual analysis as well as a New Historical approach to examine how *Middlemarch* is conditioned by its historical context.

Keywords: *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke, Will Ladislaw, Victorian marriage, modern marriage

## Introduction

Nineteenth century England experienced a great deal of change and upheaval. Societal norms were questioned as Europe experienced numerous revolutions that cried for equality. Industry and progress forced governmental action as workers fought for their rights in a society long based on status, birthright, and hierarchy. Women's issues also became a major rallying point for those interested in propelling England toward more equal ground. These issues were, of course, inextricably intertwined with the overriding social understanding of marriage. Women were expected to marry men of equal social standing and fulfill three main roles: "obeying and satisfying one's husband, keeping one's children physically and morally sound, and maintaining the household (cleaning, washing, preparing food, etc.)" (Yalom 181). These were to be her *only* functions, and stepping outside these prescribed roles was generally frowned upon, if not hostilely criticized. As the gross inequality of English society came to light, so too did the disadvantage experienced by women in their own homes and marriages. Writers of both fiction and nonfiction used their writing as a means of expressing the attitudes of long-suffering wives (and women in general) in this changing climate. To understand these changes, however, we must first examine the inhibiting norms that were being questioned.

In general, the eighteenth century in England emphasized rational thought and viewed emotion as more than just a weakness – it was a sickness of sorts. The Age of Enlightenment advocated sense over sensibility, and marriage still functioned as a way of maintaining social structure and order, much as it had for centuries. As Stephanie Coontz notes, "conservatives had warned that unions based on love and the desire for personal happiness were inherently unstable" (175), and thus discouraged. People fell in love, of course, but love wasn't necessarily a predominant factor in making a good match and wasn't always expressed within the confines of

marriage. Love was not for spouses who had made practical marriages. In fact, the idea of marriages based on love raised a number of questions that (in theory) threatened to undermine the very structure of society: “If love was the most important reason to marry, how could society condemn people who stayed single rather than enter a loveless marriage? If love disappeared from a marriage, why shouldn’t a couple be allowed to go their separate ways? If men and women were true soul mates, why should they not be equal partners in society?” (Coontz 175-6). The answer was often to ignore these dangerous questions and maintain the *status quo*.

Something changed, though, at the end of the eighteenth century that continued far into the nineteenth century and, in fact, gained momentum in the midst of the social upheaval in Victorian England. Historians now note “that modern Western marriage emerged in the period between the American Revolution and around 1830. During those fifty years, love became the most celebrated criterion for choosing a spouse, even if property, family, and social status continued to weigh heavily in the decision” (Yalom 175-6). The exact reason(s) for this newfound focus on love in marriage is (are) not entirely known, but Marilyn Yalom offers some possibilities:

Was it a natural evolution of the ideal of companionate marriage...? Was it the general spirit of revolution that helped release children from their parents’ tutelage and allowed for more independent choices? Was it backlash to the Age of Reason that permitted the passionate torrents of Romanticism to flow among readers of love poetry and fiction? Was it the revival of Christianity by Anglo-American evangelicalism, which spread the belief that ‘heaven-sent’ marriages should have the urgency of divine love? Was it the result of nascent industrialization, which removed many young women from the home and placed

them in mills and factories, where they were no longer under the watchful eye of parents? (176)

The answer is, of course, all of the above. Rarely is there one solitary catalyst for a shift in social values. Nonetheless, the result was “the gradual emancipation of young adults from their parents and the primacy accorded love matches [that] solidified during the nineteenth century” (Yalom 176). However, the doctrine of separate spheres, which relegated women to the private home sphere while men had freedom outside in the public sphere, prevailed throughout the nineteenth century, and made “men and women dependent upon each other [by] insisting that each gender was incomplete without marriage” (Coontz 176). As the nineteenth century wore on and the sweeping changes of Victorian England began to take effect – industrialization, social reform, scientific discoveries – the social values regarding love and marriage changed, too. Coontz notes that, contrary to popular contemporary belief, “the Victorians were the first people in history to try to make...married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions” (177). “Despite the stilted language of the era,” this new emphasis helped move England from the Victorian Age into the Modern Age by prefiguring “all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment, and mutual happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently during the early twentieth century” (Coontz 177-8).

These “modern marriages” involved more than just an emphasis on love, however. Other factors such as sexuality, shifting gender roles, and a dismissal of social class as the major factor in choosing a partner also played a large role in modernizing the antiquated understanding of marriage and its social function. Nineteenth century literature inevitably reflected this changing attitude. The theme of marriage in literature is nothing new, of course; authors from Shakespeare to Jane Austen repeatedly treated the subject in their works. In the latter part of the



nineteenth century, however, authors like George Eliot in *Middlemarch* transcended the staid Victorian conventions and anticipated the revision of social attitudes toward marriage that would carry England into the Modern Age.

## **The Era of *Middlemarch***

Published in 1871-2, but set in the years preceding the Reform Bill of 1832, *Middlemarch* is more than just “A Study of Provincial Life” that the novel’s subtitle declares; it is a reflection of England’s changing values regarding social status, medicine, politics, education, philanthropy, and male-female relationships. Eliot’s purpose in setting her novel forty years prior to the time she wrote it was to adopt “the role of imaginative historian, even scientific investigator...who seeks to analyse recent political and social changes by means of the particular human stories she tells” by weaving “together several strands in such a way that an individual’s lot is seen to be affected by those historical changes as they happen” (Ashton viii). As Rosemary Ashton states, “*Middlemarch* is above all about change and the way individuals and groups adapt to, or resist, change. In their marriages, in their professions, in their family life and their social intercourse, the characters of the novel are shown responding in their various ways to events both public and private” (ix).

The pre-Reform Bill era in which Eliot situates her novel is of especial note. It was a time of unprecedented social change in England prompted by the violent revolutions that had recently swept across Europe. To quell the rising unrest in England, Parliament passed a Reform Bill in 1832 that transformed England’s class structure. The greatest change that the Reform Bill of 1832 achieved was in extending “the right to vote to all males owning property worth £10 or more in annual rent. In effect the voting public thereafter included the lower middle classes but not the working classes, who did not obtain the vote until 1867, when a second Reform Bill was passed,” an event that preceded the publication of *Middlemarch*. The Reform Bill therefore “broke up the monopoly of power that the conservative landowners had so long enjoyed” and thus “represents the beginning of a new age, in which middle-class economic interests gained

increasing power” (Christ, Robson 982). Although the first Reform Bill was not inclusive, it did blur the lines between the stratified classes in England and allowed for social mobility that was hitherto impossible. By setting *Middlemarch* in the period immediately before the passage of the first Reform Bill, Eliot was able to situate her characters in a time when the changes they experience would have been new and different, perhaps even exciting.

### **The Subtext of *Middlemarch*'s Structure**

In addition to its social significance, *Middlemarch*'s treatment of marriage is also structurally significant. Writers have typically used marriage as a device of finality to bring the action of a work to a tidy conclusion – recall the “Reader, I married him” ending of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Middlemarch* instead has marriage as a primary focus. The novel's heroine Dorothea Brooke is married to Mr. Casaubon in chapter ten, with more than seventy chapters of the novel left. This placement allows Eliot to explore the vexed unions that traditional ideas of marriage create rather than the harmonious ones that are alluded to in the conventional resolutions of many antecedent texts, such as Austen's novels. Therefore, by treating marriage as the subject of the story rather than the effect, complex and dynamic representations of marital unions emerge. The reader observes the Casaubons' utterly disappointing marriage as Dorothea's hopeful expectations are shattered by her husband whose expectations of marital life prove to be the exact opposite of hers. Dorothea anticipates that her marriage “would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (29). Because Casaubon is a (self-proclaimed) scholar and her greatest desire is for knowledge, she muses,

‘I should learn everything then,’ she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. ‘It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England...’ (29)

Casaubon, on the other hand, “believed that he had found even more than he demanded: [Dorothea] might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary” because she is “a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, [who] is sure to think her husband’s mind powerful” (279). Although their motives are not necessarily poor ones, they do adhere to the traditional concept of the wife being subservient to her husband and thus prove to be problematic for Dorothea and Casaubon’s marital union. Dorothea’s admiration for Casaubon’s intellect dwindles after she learns that Casaubon’s ambitious and perpetual work-in-progress entitled “Key to all Mythologies” has already been completed by the Germans. Casaubon also begins to understand that by marrying Dorothea in order to gain more of a utilitarian adornment than a wife, marriage is not “particularly blissful” (376). Their marital crisis worsens, as does Dorothea’s regret, as Casaubon’s health fails. Dorothea descends into a “reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage” as she “saw her own and her husband’s solitude” (426). Their growing disparity as the foundations for their marriage fade causes Casaubon to regard Dorothea with an “unresponsive hardness” (425), leading her to wonder if he regrets having married her at all. The narrator regards Dorothea in a sympathetic manner, stating that “in such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate” (426). It would be understandable for Dorothea’s resentment to turn to hate over the failure her marriage has become; however, such a reaction would be counter to Dorothea’s kind and understanding nature. The fact that Dorothea is overcome by misery and anger, albeit tempered, is a testament to the loss of hope for any chance of the sort of marital life she had envisioned for herself and Casaubon. Had this union been the culmination of the novel’s action rather than a prominent part of the main action, such nuances would be lost.

By placing the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon as a centerpiece of her novel, Eliot uses structure to further critique outdated notions of marriage. Because love and companionship were not top priorities in choosing a spouse at this time, many (if not the majority of) couples married without spending a significant amount of time together and therefore knew little of each other when they bound themselves together for life. This practice was also a holdover from the previous century in which “even the most enthusiastic advocates of love matches had believed that love developed after one had selected a suitable prospective mate. People didn’t *fall* in love. They *tiptoed* into it” (Coontz 178). The need for couples to become acquainted before they married was therefore negated by the idea that they had their entire lives to learn about and grow to love each other.

Eliot reflects this expediency with the structure of *Middlemarch*. Dorothea meets Casaubon in chapter two, and after “three more conversations with him, [she] was convinced that her first impressions had been just” (32). Chapter five opens with Casaubon’s engagement letter to Dorothea in which he proposes, “To be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts” (44). She eagerly accepts him, and they are married five short chapters later. In a statement meant to dictate the inner anxiety of Rosamond and Lydgate, Eliot could just as easily be referring to Dorothea and Casaubon: “Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other’s mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other” (587). Because the Casaubons follow the timeline dictated by society, they fail to understand each other’s true nature; thus their marriage is doomed to fail.

The subtext here is that the social norm of quick engagements is a folly; hence “Dorothea is a victim of the conditions of civilized courtship, which do not allow the parties to gain much

knowledge of each other” (Paris 29). By fusing structure with substance in order to evaluate the hegemonic standard, Eliot offers a harsh critique of marriage in a revolutionary way. If “the typical English novel of this period ended in marriage, as if acquiring a spouse would resolve all of life’s problems” (Yalom 185), Eliot diverges from this pattern with *Middlemarch*. The novel does conclude with marriages – the most notable of which is that of Dorothea and Will Ladislaw – but theirs is a singular union. Though often argued to the contrary, Dorothea and Will’s marriage is representative of the type of modern marriage that was beginning to replace the more traditional unions of the early Victorian Age.

## Feminist Criticisms and Refutations

The essential issue in feminist criticism of *Middlemarch* is whether or not Eliot allowed the women in her novel to fully realize their potential. Critics have been divided over this issue since the novel's publication, and "the body of criticism from then till now makes surprisingly little case for it as a great feminist work" (Blake 49). Zelda Austen offers that the reasons why feminist critics have dismissed *Middlemarch* as an anti-feminist text is largely because of Eliot's biography, namely that "George Eliot should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there" (116). These disparaging critics seek to discredit Eliot for "her failure to allow...freedom for her heroines even though she achieved it herself" (Austen 117) and therefore "find their expectant feminism disappointed by the novel" (Blake 51). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue further that Eliot internalizes the patriarchal culture's definition of women and thus resists identification with her own sex. Eliot therefore creates her own "feminine anti-feminism" by "[s]eeking to legitimize her efforts and then her success as a writer as an unusual transcendence of the limits of gender," which she attempts by "resort[ing] frequently in her major novels to pledges of deference and doctrines of feminine renunciation that are directly at odds with her own aggressively pursued career" (466).

However, the critics who argue for *Middlemarch*'s feminism reject this biographical emphasis in favor of textual analysis informed by a historical perspective. Kathleen Blake argues that *Middlemarch* is undoubtedly feminist because of "the novel's focus on the disabilities of a woman's lot" (51). To support her argument, Blake identifies "women's natures, their need for work, men's presumption of superiority and its destructive consequences" (50) as some of the feminist views of the period that Eliot shared with other women writers such as Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft. This view of *Middlemarch* offers a more



comprehensive understanding of Eliot's work because the critics who emphasize Eliot's biography do so at the expense of other more pertinent considerations, such as the social and cultural norms of nineteenth century England.

The feminist readings of *Middlemarch* are predominantly focused on the novel's protagonist Dorothea Brooke. It is Dorothea's fate that most angers feminist critics "because [Eliot] did not permit Dorothea...to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry" (Austen 115). Dorothea's greatest desire is for education, not marriage, in order to enact social change. This "hunger" as Kate Flint calls it (162) is the source of the ardor and energy that characterize Dorothea. Dorothea "conceives of education as something that will enable her to act" (Blake 55), but because the Victorian society in which she lives offers her no educational opportunities, Dorothea's energy "which is greater than anyone else's in the book" is tempered "precisely because energy is not expected of a woman" (Blake 56). Rather than allow her energy to be "squelched or diffused or redirected," Dorothea instead "grasps at the closest objects of enthusiasm, Mr. Casaubon and his work" in order to save herself from "the haze of undirected energy" (Blake 54). While no critics argue in favor of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, many do not understand it as Eliot's indictment of the lack of educational opportunities for women. Dorothea's attraction to the aloof Casaubon arises from the social "conditions that make a poor dry mummified pedant appear to an ardent young woman who has seen nothing better as a sort of angel of vocation and of the education that enables vocation" (Blake 55). Eliot does not simply allow her heroine to meekly submit to her wifely role, but rather implies that Dorothea's decision to marry Casaubon is her attempt to achieve the education she so desires through the

only means available to a woman in her society. By removing the authority from the male in the situation and thus allowing Dorothea to maintain her own agency, Eliot's feminism in this respect is affirmed.

Ultimately, Blake, Flint, and I draw the same conclusion – “Women are especially vulnerable because society offers them so little to do, expects less, and never imagines that they need work as much as men do. A woman's life offers a paradigm of the novel's theme – lack of vocation as tenuousness of identity” (Blake 51). This is the crux of Eliot's feminism in *Middlemarch*. By portraying Dorothea as suffering from a lack of vocation, Eliot criticizes, rather than reinforces, the restrictive and conventional society that offers marriage as the only outlet for female energy.

The subject of marriage in *Middlemarch* is the one that frustrates feminist critics the most. The argument is that “George Eliot should have seen that while she was imitating reality in depicting the misery of the unconventional heroine and the placidity of the conventional wives and mothers, she was also sanctioning the norm and making it normative” (Austen 120). This is, however, a complicated argument that cannot be examined outside of the context of Victorian society. Austen's argument continues in support of this contextualization: “The feminist's insistence that literature show women as more than bride, wife, and mother is admirable, but it can't be applied to novels that were written when most women were either brides, wives, mothers, or dependent spinsters – unless George Eliot had written exclusively about herself” (118). Flint takes up this line of argument by insisting that “it may well be misguided, in addition to being often disappointing, to assess George Eliot by late twentieth-century...feminist standards” (163). What these critics argue is that applying contemporary feminist standards to a Victorian author (even a female one) writing a Victorian novel for a Victorian public is

essentially anachronistic. Austen puts it into perspective thus: “While a George Eliot might defy *Middlemarch* and pay all her life suffering the stony rejection of her family as well as social exile, hundreds of other girls could not and did not have the talents of a George Eliot to take them out of that medium” (120). Therefore, the critique that Eliot was not as feminist as she should have been for her time is an unfair projection and neglects the commentary she *does* include in her treatment of marriage, especially Dorothea’s marriages, in *Middlemarch*.

Viewing Dorothea’s marriages in a socio-historical context involves equating a woman’s marriage with vocation. This comparison combats “the strength of [feminist readers’] horror and anger at the novel’s substitution of marriage for work” by instead positioning marriage *as* work. Elaine Showalter uses a facile, though succinct, phrase to clarify this position: “Women’s work is men” (61). For women like Dorothea who have no formal education, “men are just about all the work women have” (Blake 61). This is an important distinction in understanding Dorothea’s marital decisions. Her motivation for marrying Casaubon is to help him in his scholarly pursuits and thereby gain knowledge for herself. Her reasons for marrying Will are more complex, as will be examined later, but being his wife likewise offers her chances that she would not have had if she had not married.

Dorothea’s second marriage to Will Ladislaw at the end of *Middlemarch* is arguably the most critically contested event in the novel. Feminist critics view the union “as a copout of some magnitude” (Austen 115), a view based on the idea that “[w]hen [Eliot] allows the only possible happy route for Dorothea to be marriage, even though this was in fact perhaps the only happy route for her heroine, she is giving tacit or implicit approval to that course” (Austen 120). When viewed in light of the argument for marriage as vocation, and, as I will argue, the inclusion of progressive marital values, Dorothea’s marriage to Will is hardly such a capitulation. Unlike in

Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, no "separation of interests, or of emotional power relations" (Flint 164) exists in her marriage to Will. Dorothea does not have to act covertly in order to assert her agency because her husband neglects to consider her; instead it is Dorothea "whose principles, whose values of duty, of action rather than posing, [who leads] Will into a purposeful life" (Flint 164). Dorothea likewise recognizes her influence and takes pleasure in it. She refers to their (early) relationship with an "open smile" as "'a little kingdom'" where she "'shall give laws'" (Eliot 367). Dorothea has found in Will a man who is receptive to her thoughts and ideas and wants nothing more than to hear what she has to say. While this receptivity and inspiration should be viewed by feminist critics as positive, they instead prove to these critics that Dorothea is simply a woman who needs a man. Blake insists, however, that this is a reductive view because it "pays very little attention to...what she needs him *for*" (61).

Will's desire to please Dorothea and his unconditional acceptance, adoration, and support of her give Dorothea a power that she lacks in any of her other relationships in the novel. Therefore, Dorothea's marriage to Will does not *disempower* her as is so often argued, but rather it *empowers* her. Will's later role as an "ardent public man" (Eliot 836) also proves Dorothea's empowerment through her second marriage; her adjective "ardent" is used to describe the man he becomes as Dorothea's husband. Compared to her disappointed expectations in her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea's desire to do good in the world finds an outlet in her marriage to Will. If Dorothea "could not be an M.P....she could be an M.P.'s wife" (Austen 119). As Eliot states in the novel's Finale, "Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help" (836). Eliot therefore represents in Dorothea and Will's union a recognition of marriage's necessity for women in nineteenth century England, but by allowing Dorothea to willingly and

joyfully support, if not influence, her husband's activities, Eliot implies that even though superior women like Dorothea were "still not able to transcend circumstances" (Austen 127), they could use marriage to their own advantage.

In relation to the novel's ending, there is a passage that is often cited by critics on both sides of this debate: "Many who knew [Dorothea], thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done..." (836). Flint asserts that the "narrator anticipates the objections of both contemporary and modern critics" with this passage, and that it "may also suggest a touch of unease on George Eliot's own part" (164-5). While it may have been true that Eliot would rather have left Dorothea to her independence, "Dorothea's role is bound up in the gradual social amelioration which will come through cooperation, and within which women may have an important intercessionary part to play" (Flint 165). Eliot knew that in her Victorian society Dorothea would have had little recourse to enact change. Blake offers a poignant historical example to illustrate this point:

The present for Eliot's readers was the recent passage of the second Reform Bill. *Middlemarch* treats the period of the first, and though it ends with its defeat, the historical perspective that shows this to be but temporary is built into the novel; for instance, to locate the story in 'ante-reform times' is to locate it in relation to the ultimate passage of reform. Dorothea, through a husband who works for this passage, contributes something to a movement that is not defeated and that qualifies...as a far-resonant action. (68)

By emphasizing Dorothea's "wifely help" in this significant way, it is much harder to categorize the "woman's text in *Middlemarch* [as] the fall of Dorothea" (Showalter 149). It is quite the contrary: Dorothea's propensity for good is promoted by her companionate marriage to Will.

## Sexuality and the Modern Marriage

In the shift from Victorian to modern marriages, one major factor is sexuality. Spouses have always had sex, of course, but a sexual relationship was not something to be outwardly acknowledged or recognized, especially in the Victorian Age that stressed propriety over passion. Sex for reproduction was, of course, an important part of marriages, but the idea of a woman *enjoying* sex was abominable and offensive. In the Middle Ages, women were widely acknowledged as sexually insatiable – the Latin phrases *semper parata ad coitum* (always ready for sex) and *lassata sed non satiata* (tired but not satisfied) were applied directly to women and described their sexual appetites. Theologians like St. Jerome and Augustine warned men of the dangers of oversexed women who would destroy their chances of getting into heaven. Over time, the emphasis on separate spheres and a strict adherence to prescribed gender roles became firmly ensconced in the public consciousness, and the belief that women desired sex changed. Men “were now considered the more lustful creatures” because exalting women as “angel[s]...stripped [them] of all physical desire” (Yalom 182). Though wives were expected, if not obligated, to ensure their husbands were sexually gratified, there existed a quandary: how could a wife be a lover without being a sexual creature? Women were certainly not sexually educated; that type of knowledge was for prostitutes, not respectable women. This lack of a sexual education for women can to some degree be understood from the nineteenth century mindset. The prevailing belief was that the only purpose for a woman to have sexual knowledge outside of marriage would be to engage in prostitution. Therefore, education on how to relate to men sexually was focused on virtue before marriage (with virtue equating to ignorance) and obedience and monogamy after marriage. The apparent fear was that too much knowledge of sexual matters could prompt women to engage in lewd activities. David Trotter notes Sally

Shuttleworth's objection "that the novel grants Dorothea a 'strongly passionate sexual nature' and then forbids her to understand its 'workings.'" It insists throughout on the desirability of integrating intellect with ardor, but then makes an exception where sexuality is concerned" (44). This is only partially correct, however; it is not necessarily Eliot who maintains her heroine's sexual ignorance, but rather society's refusal to allow women to understand the mechanics of their own sexuality. Instead, Eliot covertly examines this predicament in *Middlemarch* as Dorothea's sexual repression wanes under her desire for Will Ladislaw.

Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, "a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father" (837), is generally viewed by critics as an unconsummated union. Like other women of her class, Dorothea has lived a sheltered existence that leaves her unprepared for the sexual reality of marriage. Her husband – the man who is to introduce her to sexuality – is much older than she is, and he seems uninterested in the physical aspect of marriage. Dorothea is entirely unaware of this, of course, nor does she seem to mind either at first. Her sister Celia, however, attempts in her own limited way to make Dorothea realize that Casaubon is not the right mate. Celia's comments about Mr. Casaubon's moles highlights for the reader the flaws and infirmities that Dorothea has chosen to ignore. Helena Michie observes that this "contrast...between modes of perception" between the sisters "enables Eliot to 'resolve the literary problem of representing a heroine who is simultaneously innocent and desirable, sexually repressed and highly erotic'" (qtd. in Trotter 56). Casaubon, however, is entirely de-sexualized: On their honeymoon in Rome, Casaubon spends most of his time in the Vatican library researching his "Key to all Mythologies" rather than enjoying the company of his new, young bride.

It is while on her honeymoon that Dorothea's sexuality is recognized, though not by herself or her husband. Casaubon's cousin Will Ladislaw is present in Rome studying art, and it



is there that his sexualization of Dorothea begins. He and his friend Naumann observe her in the Vatican Museum, and Naumann's assessment of her "*sensuous force* controlled by spiritual *passion*" (190, my italics) influences Will's perception of Dorothea's beauty and sexuality. The wayward dilettante then "discovered his calling, the worship of the divine Dorothea" (Paris 46). When Dorothea poses as Santa Clara for Naumann's painting, "Will was divided between the inclination to fall at the Saint's feet and kiss her robe, and the temptation to knock Naumann down while he was adjusting her arm" (216). His reverent desire for her escalates from this moment, and his agonizing love for her is only heightened by his contempt for her situation.

Eliot has the two meet at Lowick Manor before Dorothea's marriage, and the contrast between her future husband and his young cousin is apparent. In the midst of "a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine," Casaubon "had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background" (74). Will, on the other hand, appears in the same setting as "a figure, conspicuous on the dark background of evergreens" (78). Will gives the appearance "of sunny brightness" while "Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless" (209). Trotter notes that this direct contrast is Eliot's use of form "to be extraordinarily frank in assessing the prospects of the two men who want to marry Dorothea Brooke. Mr. Casaubon...as a man, has no distinctive shape. He does not stand out" (40). This, Trotter argues, signifies Casaubon's inability or unwillingness to "reproduce himself"; thus he "does not stand a chance against Will Ladislav" (40).

Trotter bases this analysis on the theory of sexual selection as explained by Darwin in *The Origin of the Species*:

The struggle that shapes sexual selection...is not for existence in relation to 'other organic beings' or to 'external conditions' but, rather, 'between the individuals of one sex, generally the males, for the possession of the other sex.' Victory, here, depends less on 'general vigour' than on the development (by the male of the species) of an array of 'special weapons'; while for the unsuccessful competitor, the outcome is not death but few or no offspring. (Trotter 41)

Therefore, Trotter concludes, "Mr. Casaubon's lack of difference ought to rule him out as a mate for the strongly differentiated Dorothea" (42). It is important to note here that Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon does remain childless, while her later marriage to Will produces a son.

Dorothea's desire for Will also increases during her marriage to Casaubon, but she is unaware of it until long after his death. She longs to see him when not in his company – she imagines his face in that of his grandmother's portrait that hangs in her boudoir and her mood is instantly elevated, and she insists that he remain in Middlemarch when he is offered an opportunity by Mr. Brooke to do so and acknowledges that she gave her response "“without thinking of anything else than my own feeling”" (368). Her husband, however, has some idea that his young cousin is a potential challenge to his marriage. Casaubon's sexual jealousy causes him to go so far as to ban Will from Lowick so that he may not see Dorothea. This expulsion "arouses in Will a new display: an impatient arising" (Trotter 59). Casaubon also, in a mean gesture of attempted posthumous control, includes a codicil in his will that states Dorothea will forfeit her inheritance if she marries Will after Casaubon's death. What he fails to realize, however, is that "it would sully [Will's] image of both Dorothea and himself if there were any sexual component in their relationship or any disloyalty to Casaubon" (Paris 46).

The relationship between Dorothea and Will does gain an overtone of sexuality after Casaubon's death. When Mrs. Cadwallader tells Dorothea that Will "'is making a sad dark-blue scandal by warbling continually with your Mr. Lydgate's wife, who they tell me is as pretty as pretty can be. It seems nobody ever goes into the house without finding this young gentleman lying on the rug or warbling at the piano'" (628-9), she arouses a sense of jealousy unseen before in the saintly Dorothea. Her dark mood overcomes her, and as Dorothea drives away in her carriage, "[t]he tears came and rolled down her cheeks, but she did not know it. The world, it seemed, was turning ugly and hateful, and there was no place for her trustfulness" (629). Her anger and frustration toward Casaubon never reached such heights, mainly because she turned to thoughts of Will to comfort her, but the idea of losing him to another woman is entirely too much for her to bear. Her feelings alternate "between anger with Will and the passionate defence of him" (630). Later, Dorothea pays a visit to Rosamond and finds her alone with Will in what appears to be a compromising position: "...close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour" (775). The scene is, of course, an innocent one, but Dorothea's jealousy again overwhelms her. She had dismissed Mrs. Cadwallader's information as mere gossip, but this scene seems to confirm her story. Dorothea now feels that she has a sexual rival in Rosamond, and, as the scene she witnessed suggests, Dorothea is losing.

This event does, however, precipitate the culmination of Dorothea and Will's relationship. Rosamond, in her most unselfish action of the book, reveals Will's true feelings to Dorothea: "'He said yesterday that no other woman existed for him besides you'" (798). Dorothea is relieved and joyous, yet overwhelmed by her own reaction to this revelation. With

the threat of her sexual competitor removed, Will's next call on her is markedly different from any of his other visits. When his arrival is announced, Dorothea's reaction is described in sexual terms: "There was nothing that she *longed* for at the moment except to see Will: the possibility of seeing him had *thrust* itself insistently between her and every other object; and yet she had a *throbbing excitement* like an alarm upon her – a sense that she was doing something daringly defiant for his sake" (807, my italics). Their feeble attempts at proclaiming their love for one another prove too difficult for them, so their declaration is instead represented by the sexual act of a kiss. The description begins with trembling lips, and "there is an embarrassed coyness in the narrator's tone when they first kiss" (Flint 164-5). In a novel abundant with detail, this moment is simply described: "It was never known which lips were the first to move towards the other lips; but they kissed tremblingly, and then they moved apart" (810). The repetition of "trembling" emphasizes this moment of Dorothea's sexual awareness.

As previously stated, Dorothea and Will's marriage produces a son. This is proof that, unlike her marriage to Casaubon, her union with Will is consummated. As her husband, Will does what Casaubon would not, or could not, do: he recognizes her sexuality, then allows her to recognize it for herself.

## **Shifting Gender Roles: Dismissing Separate Spheres**

The doctrine of separate spheres that ordered society in the nineteenth century ensured that wives stayed firmly ensconced in the private sphere of the home while their husbands reigned in the public sphere. In Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, these separate spheres exist within the home as well. Their "marital disputes provoke a retreat into mutually exclusive gendered space" (Trotter 48), in which the other is not welcome or especially wanted. Casaubon's domain is his library, while Dorothea is very often found in her "blue-green boudoir" with its tapestry of a stag who "looked more like a ghost in his blue-green world" and the portrait of Will's grandmother, which acts as a continual reminder of him in its resemblance (273). Upon returning from their honeymoon, both Dorothea and Casaubon are frustrated by the disappointment that their marriage has proven to be. They each, therefore, withdraw "into what one might think of as an extremity of gender identification: all male, all female" (Trotter 49). Because "the propensity of each [is] to adhere to the developing doctrine of separate spheres" (Flint 164), they are grounded in the social convention of marriage, which proves disastrous.

Dorothea's marriage to Will, however, shifts the dominant social gender roles, and their relationship is therefore more equitable and thus modernized. The essential problem Dorothea faces is "What is a noble, ardent, gifted woman to do in nineteenth century England, with its demeaning attitudes toward women, its refusal to give them a real education, and its exclusion of them from socially important work?" (Paris 29). Her only real option is to marry: "Because she is a woman, Dorothea cannot dream of doing splendid deeds herself but must live vicariously through a man...She longs to marry a great man, not only to participate in his glory but to facilitate his achievements and thus do something of world-historical importance herself. She needs him to need her help" (Paris 34). Dorothea had thought that her marriage to Casaubon

would fulfill this need because he initially expressed his desire for her help in his scholarly pursuits. His later rejection of her “reinforce[d] the sense of uselessness and inferiority that she married him to escape” (Paris 39). Will does truly need Dorothea, though. Her ardent nature saves him “from a sense of aimlessness and failure,” while he provides “a wonderful antidote to Casaubon” (Paris 47) because “Will Ladislaw always seemed to see more in what she said than she herself saw” (Eliot 361). With the validation and devotion that Will provides her, “Dorothea cannot help wanting to be with a man who thus confirms her sense of her own value” (Paris 47).

Applying gender theory to Will further highlights the shift in gender roles exhibited in his relationship with Dorothea. As Michael Cohen observes, “Ladislaw, alone of the male characters who come within the sphere of Dorothea’s charm, does not assess her from a male supremacist view” (100). This analysis partly explains why Will is an appropriate match for Dorothea. Cohen argues that “among the men Ladislaw is preferable because his sensibility has been trained by a universal feminine experience of dependency” (101). Throughout the novel, “Ladislaw moves from dependence on Casaubon to dependence on Mr. Brooke, uneasily remains there a while, and then finds himself more or less unwillingly a free agent” until he marries Dorothea and becomes mostly economically dependent on his new wife (Cohen 102). While this history of dependence does not make Will effeminate, “In the [Victorian] middle-class construction of gender, which included economic independence for the male and dependence for the female, Ladislaw *was* feminine” (Cohen 103). Will is uneasy with this distinction and continuously states that being with Dorothea is impossible because of their disparity. Will does envision leaving Middlemarch to pursue “political writing, political speaking” that will gain “him such distinction that he would not seem to be asking Dorothea to step down to him” so as not to appear “as a needy adventurer trying to win the favour of a rich woman” (507, 498). Will,

however, “is no Heathcliff” (Paris 48), and he remains in Middlemarch as Mr. Brooke’s secretary so he can be near to Dorothea.

Will’s emotional nature (he is an artist and a poet, after all) and his propensity for “irresoluteness and flexibility that make him...impressionable” and therefore able to take the pressure of other people’s thought (Blake 67) also give him feminine characteristics. This quality causes him to be “pliable” and thus Dorothea states that, because he expresses a desire to never do or say anything that she disapproves of, she “‘shall have a little kingdom then, where [she] shall give laws’” (Eliot 210, 367). Will therefore takes on the submissive role that was expected of women, not men. Because Dorothea “needs to make a mark somewhere” (Blake 67), Will becomes the right partner for her and she is therefore able to help make him “an ardent public man” (Eliot 836). Flint supports this gender theory reading because, as she states, it is “undeniable” that Eliot maintained a “continual interest in the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures. She is alive to the shifting connections of gender and power, as they manifest themselves in both familial and broader contexts; and making her readers think about the connections between power, authority, and gender relations is an inseparable part of her literary and critical enterprise” (163). The emphasis on the social construction of gender and the alteration of this construct in Dorothea and Will’s relationship furthers the case for Dorothea’s empowerment through the implementation of modern ideals in her second marriage.

## Social Mobility and the Companionate Marriage

As companionate marriages were on the rise in the nineteenth century, women still could not separate the economic and emotional realities of marriage. A woman who wanted to marry “did not have to be reminded that her material well-being would depend on the financial situation of her husband” (Yalom 180). This condition presented a conflict in the consciousness of women, though, and the question of love without money or money without love arose. Yalom notes that because a marriage that ultimately provided both was the ideal, “novelists like Jane Austen usually skirted the issue by arranging for their female characters to find love and financial security in the same man” (179). Eliot, though, ever wary of the dangers of idealistic expectations, would not provide such a result for Dorothea.

Although Will is Casaubon’s second cousin, they are not on equal social ground. Will’s grandmother, Casaubon’s aunt, was disinherited ““because she made what they called a *mésalliance*, though there was nothing to be said against her husband except that he was a Polish refugee who gave lessons for his bread”” (365). This scandalous heritage makes Will suspect in Middlemarch society. The “murkiness of his background and social position” (Paris 48) make him an object of scorn. Social mobility became a real option with the industrialization of England, but this caused “an anxiety of imitation” – the fear that “the external difference that gives one shape to a gentleman and another to a clerk” would cease to exist (Trotter 53). Without such distinctions, the long-established hierarchy of English society would be compromised. Will represents one of these new “imitators”; he comes from a disgraced heritage, yet maintains a connection with his cousin Casaubon and is therefore able to engage (to a degree) with “proper” society.



Will's marriage to Dorothea "upsets the conventional economy of marriage and the distribution of property in Middlemarch" (Miller 147). Casaubon's codicil adds to these complications by threatening to embroil Dorothea in scandal if news of its existence becomes widely known. Sir James expresses the fear that "'the world will suppose that she gave [Casaubon] some reason'" to legally keep Dorothea from Will, "'and that is what makes it so abominable – coupling her name with this young fellow's'" (484). Dorothea's brother-in-law rages "'that there never was a meaner, more ungentlemanly action than this'" (484) than to cast doubt on her honor. Mr. Brooke ironically insists that "'Ladislaw is a gentleman,'" to which Sir James replies, "'I am sure Casaubon was not'" (485). This contrast between the genteel clergyman and the (reformed) wayward dilettante underscores the futility of the social hierarchy that attempts to place a chasm between Dorothea and Will.

She, of course, has no reservations about defying both the codicil and society by marrying Will. Dorothea emphatically renounces her inheritance as she and Will declare their love for each other: "'I don't mind about poverty – I hate my wealth... We could live quite well on my own fortune – it is too much – seven hundred-a-year – I want so little – no new clothes – and I will learn what everything costs'" (812-3). Dorothea defies all of Middlemarch society in choosing to marry Will. Mr. Cadwallader summarizes this perspective: "'Mrs. Casaubon may be acting imprudently: she is giving up a fortune for the sake of a man, and we men have so poor an opinion of each other that we can hardly call a woman wise who does that'" (817). Ultimately, her decision is so shocking because "Dorothea's commitment to Will is a true decision and not the preprogrammed following of a...rule" (Miller 140). Dorothea does not just disregard Will's "questionable" heritage; she seems to revel in it. She is fascinated by the portrait of his grandmother that hangs in her boudoir at Lowick and continually seeks comfort in the memory

of his ancestor. Will credits Dorothea for her kind and singular treatment of his family history: ““I did not believe that you would let any circumstance of my birth create a prejudice in you against me, though it was sure to do so in others”” (808). By choosing to marry Will, Dorothea acts on her genuine feeling rather than social pressure. When Celia questions how Dorothea came to such a decision, Dorothea responds, ““No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know”” (822). This simple statement provides the motivation for Dorothea’s marriage to Will. She is not swept up in any romantic illusions as she was with Casaubon. As the narrator states in the Finale, “[t]hey were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it” (835). Because class and wealth have no bearing whatsoever on their marriage, Dorothea and Will negate the predominant social reason for choosing a spouse in favor of a more modern, equitable, companionate union.

## Conclusion

While *Middlemarch* does not indulge in romantic declarations, it is no less evident that companionate marriages based on love are triumphant in the end. As a writer, “George Eliot was deeply mistrustful of creating idealistic exceptions” (Flint 161); therefore, because Dorothea and Will’s marriage lacks the idealistic, romantic coyness of Rosamond and Lydgate’s courtship and the intellectual idealism of Dorothea’s attraction to Casaubon, it is ultimately a solid, equal, and appropriate union. The marriage of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy likewise falls into this latter category and is described as “a solid mutual happiness” (Eliot 832); a statement that could also be applied to Dorothea and Will’s marriage.

As to criticism regarding the suitability of Ladislav as a husband for Dorothea, their marriage proves that Eliot refused to provide an orthodox romantic closure in *Middlemarch*. Throughout her career, Eliot fought against the idea that women could only produce frivolous writing, and because she firmly believed that the truth of reason and feeling should ultimately triumph over the social standards for acceptable behavior in women, Dorothea and Will’s union thus exemplifies her revision of marital values.

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## **Vita**

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